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September 2007

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What's in a Name?

Transitional Communities
Our Little Days



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YOUR MOUTH IS.



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BLESS YOUR HEART

VOLUME 20 NUMBER 07 SEPTEMBER 2007

Jesus' first sermon begins with a blessing. What does it mean to be blessed? What does it mean to bless someone else?

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VOICES

How Are You? I'm Blessed, Thanks

by Audrey Novak Riley

Not long ago, I was introduced to someone. I extended my hand and said, "How are you?" She shook my hand and said, "I'm blessed, thanks; how are you?"

I don't remember how I replied; I probably said, "fine, thanks," and went on to chat about the weather. But I've never forgotten what she said.

And as I look around, I realize that I'm blessed too, thanks. I'm blessed to work for an organization of faithful and thoughtful women who care so much about studying Scripture together that they call, write, and e-mail me months ahead of time wanting to know about the fall Bible study—and now it's finally here! We're all blessed with the fine work of author Martha E. Stortz, whose Bible study, "Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship," begins in this issue.

In "What's in a Name?" Christa von Zychlin ponders the many and various names of a lifetime. What do your names—given, chosen, maiden, married, "nick"—mean to you? How do they bring a blessing to you?

Martha Sterne ponders the paradoxes and blessings of lives long and short in "Our Little Days."

In "Transitional Communities: Sailboats on the Ocean of Faith," Kathy Fick tells us about the blessings of campus ministry and other ways that small groups of people live their faith even when they're together only a short while.

Sue Gamelin splashes blessings around in her "Bless You!" She writes,

"We are called to be blessing-leakers for those whose lives seem to be nothing but stories of loss."

Another blessing is the wisdom of Julie Aageson. In this issue she tells us about the ancient practice of fixed-hour prayer in "Practicing the Presence of God: Morning, Evening, and Night Prayer."

Esther Menn helps us learn about the blessings of the Jewish tradition and the blessings that Christians and Jews can find together in "Rooted in God's Rich Blessings."

Hmm. After reading over that little list of articles, I realize that I'm even more blessed than I thought at the beginning of this column. The authors and columnists whose work we're all blessed to read share their wisdom and faith with all of us so generously and gracefully and graciously—they're a blessing, too.

Why not spread those blessings around a little? Invite some new people to join in Bible study, either in your own group or in another. You can download the first session of the Bible study from our Web site (www.lutheranwoman.today.org), print it out, and pass it around—and then help a new friend subscribe to the magazine. Or you could mail that printout to a relative or friend away at college or in the service and order a gift subscription for her. You can subscribe on our Web site or by telephone (800-328-4648 to order).

I'm blessed, thanks; really blessed. And how are you? 🌿

Audrey Novak Riley is blessed to be associated editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Little Flocks

by Marj Leegard

There is an old hymn

in an old black hymn book that preceded several other official hymn books. That old hymn did not make it into any of the later versions of the hymnals that I have.

When I need to hear that hymn, I sing it to myself.

I don't make the high notes, but nobody knows that except the sparrows that flock around the bird feeder and they are not so great in the chirping department either.

That old hymn sings of the "blessed little flock" and that is the trouble. Nobody wants to be in the little group, the small school, the tiny congregation, the little township whose voters are expected to vote by absentee ballot because it is not worthwhile to keep the town hall open all day for so few.

On the other hand, if we don't mind being the little group, we want to be exclusive and take pride in our boundaries.

Yes, we are a little flock, but the hymn has another truth for me. It asks the question, "Am I in that band?" and then the petition follows: "Let me not lie down to rest till this I know my Savior blest."

We keep lists. We keep lists of people to remember in our prayers. We are grateful for answers to prayer and are confident that we are heard, but no matter. We have new petitions to add. The stack of requests is sometimes damp with tears, but gathered into the petitions is the glorious constant. I know that I am in that little band that Jesus calls his own. I know because...

Those who teach taught it to me.

Those who preach proclaimed that blessing to me.

Those who sing sang it to me.

Those who welcomed me into the flock smiled it to me.

Those who write wrote it to me.

And those who walk by my side speak it to me.

Paul wrote to the Romans: "I want us to be encouraged by one another's faith when I am with you. I by yours and you by mine" (1:12 CEV).

A long time ago, I went out to North Dakota to speak at a women's gathering in a tiny church. We were packed into every inch of space. The president of the women's group called the meeting to order and, from my vantage point, I could see that there was trouble. The pastor who was to lead us in Bible study was not there yet. We sang a hymn. The pastor was still missing.

So the president laid aside her handful of papers and said, "While we are waiting, I will sing you a song." Nobody moved toward the piano. The president did not pull the words and music from her folder. No, she simply stood up in the front of that crowded room, and she lifted up her voice and sang from memory the old hymn, "The King is Coming." I will never forget the music that rang in that small space on that glorious morning. I can see the hills just beyond the open doors.

How many other little flocks are there? Let us be thankful. 🌿

Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

BABY
FATSO
SWEETKIN
BEAUTIFUL
BLONDINIT
MAMA
CHRISTA LUISE
CHILD OF GOD

what's in a name *by Christa von Zychlin*

I AM A TODDLER. My mother is from Germany and she pronounces my name like no one else. *Christa Luise*, she says, rolling the “r” and stretching my middle name out to three syllables. Other kids hear their middle names only when they’re about to get in big trouble. In my mother’s mouth—maybe because Luise is her own mother’s name and her mother lives a wide ocean away—my stretched-out name becomes gentle and melodic. Christa Lu-is-e, she repeats, sometimes looking straight through me, thinking of somebody else.

I AM FOUR YEARS OLD. I’ve just wrapped my mind around the greatly disturbing fact that my older brother and sister call me *Baby* when they are speaking to each other about me. When they realize that I object, they do it all the more. “What about Baby?” they’ll say, referring to me in the third person even though I am standing right there. Years later, at my father’s funeral, although I am a young woman, language suddenly reverts to childhood and I hear it again: “Why don’t you and Baby take the car and pick up . . .” I don’t mind at all. It occurs to me to wonder: In heaven, will anybody call me Baby?

I AM SEVEN and in first grade. I am just leaving school for the walk home. A boy leans out the school bus window and yells *Fatso*. I look around but I am the only person on the path.

Yes, I have the rounded shape of a healthy, apples-and-spinach and double-desserts-when-possible, little girl. But suddenly I am *Fatso*, a name I still remember decades later. First I feel simple astonishment. Then the seed of self-doubt, like something I have accidentally swallowed, sticks in my throat.

I AM 12 and in seventh grade. Mrs. McConnell is our social studies teacher, and she has a well-deserved reputation for being mean. She never uses our actual names, but calls us Sweetkins, Honey-pie, and Darling. With a voice as smooth as cream pie, Mrs. McConnell says paradoxical things like, “Sweetkins, stick your nose back in that corner for another 10 minutes, and I’d better not hear a word out of you.” Or “Honey dear, you don’t have a lick of sense in you, do you?” I slouch at my desk and think how you shouldn’t call people those kinds of names if you don’t mean it. In Mrs. McConnell’s voice, a term of endearment becomes a curse. I wonder who taught her that names of love should be thrown away?

I AM 15 and have just started my first job. It’s spring. I’m walking to the grocery store where I am a check-out clerk. I’m wearing my dark pants with a white top—my uniform—and wondering whether Brian at school would ever possibly like me . . . whether any boy would ever like me. Then a car passes

by, window rolled down. “Hey, Beautiful!” some older teenagers yell out. In another time or another place it might have been a threat or an annoyance. On this early April morning, however, it is an awakening and it is a gift. I have been named *Beautiful*.

I AM 20. Now I know all too well that I am beautiful, with the easy confidence of a college senior. I am studying for two months at the University of Jerusalem. *Blondinit*, my mostly dark-haired classmates call me. I make friends with a student in another department whose name is pronounced *Kah-nan*. “Like

A good name
is better than
precious ointment . . .
(Ecclesiastes 7:1a)

the land of Canaan,” he explains. Canan grins when I mistake him for a Jewish Israeli. In fact, he is a Palestinian Christian. “We are the original Christians,” he explains. I am here to study the language and am utterly naïve about the politics of the Holy Land. When I go with Canan, we ride the dilapidated blue bus, not the newer Israeli bus, although they seem to travel the same routes. One day, a few weeks into our budding camaraderie, my friend disappears. Where did he go? I only know his first name, Canan, like the promised land.

ANOTHER NEW FRIEND in Israel is named Isac. We soon start dating. Isac tells me the story of his mother arriving in Israel after World War II. She had been in a German concentration camp. Her entire family had been killed. The doctor in Israel told her that because of the trauma she had endured at the hands of the Nazis, she might never be able to have children. "She told me she never thought she would hear herself being called *Eema* (Hebrew for *Mother*)," Isac explains. "So when I was born she called me Isac because that means laughter. So she is my *Eema*, and I am her *Laughter*."

One day Isac brings me home to meet his mother. I am acutely aware that my entire name is a giveaway of my German heritage. How does she feel about her son bringing a non-Jewish girl to her home? *Christa*, she says with a welcoming smile, pronouncing it with the rolled "r," just as my own mother does. "Welcome to our home." I am overwhelmed by her hospitality.

TWO YEARS LATER I meet a seminarian and after a whirlwind romance, we are engaged. "What shall I call you?" I eagerly ask my

future mother-in-law. She looks startled. "Well, you can call me *Mom*, I guess," she says. As the years pass, I sometimes wish I had the courage to ask if I could call her by her lovely given name instead. Would that make our conversation more straightforward, less loaded with the tension of my being married to her only child? Other women and I discuss the delicate matter of what to call the in-laws. First names? Mom and Dad? Or wait for kids to arrive, then call them Grams and Gramps? My friend Alice's mother overhears our conversation and says, "Well as long as you call your mother-in-law *something*." We learn that one of her daughters-in-law doesn't call her anything at all. They have a very cordial relationship, but they've never been clear about how to name each other. Now, so much time has passed that no one wants to bring it up.

I AM A MODERN BRIDE of the 1980s, and I can't understand that there is even a question. With a name like *von Zychlin*, I have earned the right to keep it. How many times have I spelled it out for people (small "v," capital "Z,"

please)? When I was growing up, my father insisted on telling the phone company to alphabetize it the way it was in Germany, according to the "Z" rather than the "v" and they surprisingly obliged. Then our family endured the 2 a.m. phone calls saying, "Hey, did you know your name is the last one in the phone book?" (Yes, as a matter of fact we did.) I have patiently corrected the mangled pronunciations by teachers and telemarketers and the endless explanations: "No, it's not Dutch, it's German." I have come to terms with the fact that few legal forms have spaces enough to accommodate my long autograph. So of course, I will keep that last name—it is mine.

How surprised I am when my easy-going fiancé suddenly gets very serious on this matter. Maybe I would have had an easier time with someone named Smith. But wouldn't you know, my husband-to-be has a history with his last name, too. When his grandparents entered the United States from Finland, the immigration officers took one look at the name and reached a quick verdict: "*Nieminen*? Too long



and too many vowels." Out came the correction pen and with two quick strokes, *Nieminen* became *Nieme*, pronounced *Nee-Mee*.

My fiancé was active in high school sports, where lots of locker room scenes played out: "What's your name again? *Knee-me*? Okay!" And the rowdy adolescent boys would attempt to do exactly that. So as a young adult he decided to change his name back to the original, all four glorious syllables of it. Of course he thinks his future wife will gladly bear that same name, with its splendid confusion of m's and n's.

Should we hyphenate our names, *Nieminen-von Zychlin*? We quickly discard that idea. Finally I come up with what I am sure is the perfect solution. I will keep my name, and any daughters we have will have my name, so that I can pass on my heritage. Any future sons, however, can have his name.

A smart, modern solution, I think, even though it takes me a little longer to persuade him. As it turns out, and as I like to joke, God must be male after all, because He gave us three boys! So only the dog

and I share the last name of "von Zychlin" in our home today.

I AM A MOTHER. *Mom* sounds, well, like my mother-in-law's name to me. *Mother* is too formal. I want to go retro and be called *Mama*. "Mama loves you," I croon to my babies. I read them children's books where the mothers are called *Mama*. When we live for a few years in other countries, the name *Mama* has a satisfying international flavor to it. I sign birthday cards to them "with love, *Mama*." So what do my children call me? It never varies; they always say *Mom*.

I am well into middle age. What names do I still hear? *Christa Luise*? My 83-year-old mother sometimes says it, but rarely now, and she is the only one. *Beautiful*? Maybe only from my husband of more than two decades. After all these years, one of my sons has started to call me *Mama* on occasion, in order to wheedle a little extra lunch money out of me or the use of my car. I knowingly give in. I am called *Pastor Christa* by parishioners and *Mrs. Nieminen* by people who don't know me. The other night I catch myself introducing myself as *Eric's*

Mom at my youngest son's school, a sure sign that I am tired.

What names will I receive in my future? When my children are married and grandchildren are born, will they call me *Grandma* or *Omi*? Will future colleagues call me *Old* or *Wise*? Will there always be someone to call me *Sister* or *Friend*?

AT BAPTISM, I was named with my full name and then given a new one besides: *Child of God*. What does God call me, when God speaks in my heart? God speaks my name gently and rolls out the "r." God speaks my name clearly, each syllable distinct.

And how will God name me, when I'm greeted in heaven? Maybe with the names that have served me on earth. Or could there be a new name in heaven, as well? *Blessed*? *Beloved*? *Friend of God*? Or maybe, like a bunch of teenage boys from a car window, God will call out a name for me that will be more strange and wonderful yet. And then that is who I will be. 🌸

The Rev. Christa von Zychlin and her husband, the Rev. Wayne Nieminen, are pastors of Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hartland, Wis.





CALENDAR NOTES

September

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
from sources including *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, *Sundays and Seasons*, and *Lutheran Book of Worship*, published by
Augsburg Fortress, Publishers
(www.augsburgfortress.org)

There are lots of calendars in our lives: civil (beginning January 1), academic (varies, August or September), fiscal (varies, often October 1), liturgical (first Sunday of Advent), and more. Many congregations begin a new religious education year in September. Our Jewish brothers and sisters begin a new year this month too, with ancient observances prescribed in the book of Leviticus.

2 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 22

Today's texts begin with a passage from Proverbs, a book we don't hear from very often in the lectionary. It is traditionally attributed to King Solomon, but scholars suggest that although parts of it may date back to his reign, the book received its final editing much later, perhaps in the sixth century before Christ. Jesus clearly knew the passage we hear today, as we can see in the Gospel reading. Today's readings are Proverbs 25:6-7; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14.

9 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 23

Today we hear almost the whole of Paul's letter to Philemon. Scholars suggest that it was written in the mid to late 50s. The text itself hints that Paul sent this letter to Philemon in the hand of his own runaway slave Onesimus, hoping at least to soften Philemon's anger with the youth. So how did the story end? What happened to Onesimus? Sixty or so years later, in about the year 107, Ignatius wrote at length about a Bishop Onesimus of Ephesus, quoting Paul's letter

freely. Did the runaway slave grow up to become the great bishop? A longstanding tradition says so. Scholars say that it's possible, and some even speculate that Bishop Onesimus personally gathered Paul's surviving letters (grateful to the man who had brought him both faith and freedom) for publication. Today's texts are Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Philemon 1-21; and Luke 14:25-33.

13 Rosh Hashanah

Today—or rather, beginning at sundown last night—our Jewish friends and neighbors celebrate the beginning of the new year. Jesus and his friends would have observed this holy day, which is instituted in Leviticus 23:24-25. Rosh Hashanah is a time for introspection, acknowledging the mistakes of the old year and resolving to do better in the new. The 10 days between now and Yom Kippur are a time when observant Jews seek reconciliation with anyone they may have wronged over the past year.

14 Holy Cross Day

Today is the anniversary of the dedication of the Church of the Resurrection, also known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the year 335. Tradition says that it is built over the site of the Crucifixion and Christ's tomb, discovered by the Empress Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, who freed the faith from Roman oppression. The texts appointed for today are Numbers 21:4b-9; 1 Corinthians 1:18-24; and John 3:13-17.

16 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 24
All three of today's texts are about God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's mercy, God's initiative in finding the lost and bringing us back. Thanks be to God! Read Exodus 32:7-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; and Luke 15:1-10.

17 Hildegard of Bingen, abbess

This amazing woman was a leader in her own community and a well-known preacher throughout Europe. People of all classes asked her for advice, and she rebuked popes and princes when they needed it. She was a musician, herbalist, visionary, poet, and dramatist—is there anything Hildegard could not do? And yet she humbly said she was only a feather floating on the breath of God.

21 Matthew, apostle and evangelist

The people hated tax collectors like Matthew, considering them traitors and collaborators. But read today's Gospel passage to see what Jesus thought. Today's texts are Ezekiel 2:8-3:11; Ephesians 2:4-10; and Matthew 9:9-13.

22 Yom Kippur >

This most important day on the Jewish calendar is instituted in Leviticus 23:26 and following. Jesus and his friends, family, and first followers would have observed Yom Kippur. This solemn Day of Atonement is

when our Jewish friends and neighbors gather to atone for the sins of the past year—not an individual's sins against other people, but humanity's sins against God.

23 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 25
What does God really think of earthly wealth and how we handle it? Today's texts give us a hint: Amos 8:4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13. The parable in the Gospel can be puzzling, but consider the shrewd steward's actions. Is he giving up his own commission to make friends with the debtors, giving up money today for friends tomorrow?

29 Michael and All Angels

Today the church ponders the variety of God's created order and the limits of our human knowledge of it. Angels aren't cute little beings in white robes; if they were,

they wouldn't have to open every conversation with a human being with "Fear not." Daniel 10:10-14, 12:1-3; Revelation 12:7-12; Luke 10:17-20.

30 Sunday after Pentecost,
Lectionary 26

Today's texts keep us focused on that uncomfortable question of money. Can all our wealth keep us safe? Amos 6:1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31.

30 Jerome, translator, teacher

This great scholar translated the Scriptures from the original Hebrew and Greek into the vernacular of his place and time: Latin. His Vulgate Bible, completed in about the year 405, was the standard translation of Scripture for Christians for more than a thousand years, until Martin Luther translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into German.



Praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

transitional communities

SAILBOATS ON THE OCEAN OF FAITH

by Kathy Fick



San Diego was our destination.

A group of us had looked forward to enjoying the delights of southern California for a few days. What a change from the northern plains! We watched the harbor for the great ocean-going ships that would arrive and depart with the precision of the Swiss rail system. With detailed itineraries and ship's manifests listing every passenger on board, these majestic vessels rule the sea.

They were such a contrast to the sweet picture of summer in my part of the world: a small blue lake with a little sailboat tacking across the breeze. The boating season in North Dakota is anything but predictable, and we never know when the lakes will open after the long winter. The idea of drawing up detailed itineraries or passenger lists for our little boats makes me smile. With different visitors at the lake each weekend and novices taking the tiller alongside third-generation sailors, we have to let the sun and the wind design our time on the water.

The ships and sailboats remind me so much of the ministry I serve at Christus Rex Lutheran Campus Center at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. Christus Rex is one of more than 180 campus ministries that serve state and private colleges and universities nationwide. An additional 600 campuses hold ministries with cooperating congregations.

Every fall I wonder just who might show up for our activities and how the wind of the Spirit might shape our course that year. But whether we sail in a great ship or a tiny skiff, we all sail the same baptismal waters as we learn what it means to live and grow together in community.

ON THESE WATERS TOGETHER

Campus ministries include a transitional community of believers. Every August, we encounter the gifts of the people of God on our campus for that year. Each week we prepare worship, knowing that students who have been on campus all year might come for the first time . . . even in May. Every year, we wonder how to sail these waters together, novices alongside third-generation Lutherans.

Over the years, I have learned to love the rhythm of campus ministry. It is a mission field, to be sure, and just as in the early church, we often wonder what it means to be faithful as we act boldly in the name of Christ.

Is it any surprise, then, that my colleague Kristine Braaten-Lee delights in her call to campus ministry? Raised in the mission fields of Madagascar, she served in parish ministry until recently. Upon accepting the call as campus pastor at the University of Minnesota at Morris, she discovered a feeling of

home. Life as a missionary kid had prepared her well for this sailboat adventure of campus ministry.

STORMS, CHANGE, AND MOVEMENT

The sailboats of such transitional communities as campus ministries may seem small, but their ability to respond to the winds of change gives the church an agile presence in the world. This is the true gift that they bring to the larger church. As my partner in ministry, the Rev. Tim Megorden, has remarked, "It's easier to change course with a sailboat than an ocean liner."

Even the most well-designed plans encounter storms, and small lifeboats flock to ships in need of rescue. Ten years ago my own community of Grand Forks, North Dakota, was devastated by flood and fire. Our homes, our schools, our businesses, and our churches were destroyed. Lutheran Disaster Response brought an important community of healing to our people and our synod as we recovered. The offerings sent in support of our neighbors and the hands and faces of those who served on behalf of the whole church were a bold witness of faith. Each time a disaster strikes, opportunities arise for any one of us to join such a transitional community of faith.

Unique to transitional communities are the networks that form so

quickly. Military families are especially familiar with these. I asked Judy Beeck, wife of a career Air Force officer, how she was able to create community and establish relationships given the regular relocations of military life. "You jump right in and you *do*. You don't wait around to be asked. You learn to volunteer," she told me. That's exactly how she and many other military family members bring their gifts to the congregations, acting boldly, opening eyes and minds to new ways of seeing and doing. Such bold discipleship by Judy and others like her reminds me of Peter, jumping out of his boat to meet Jesus.

With his eyes on his Savior, Peter walked on water. These military women and men and their families and the chaplains who minister to them all teach us about the breadth and depth and strength of the network of transitional communities.

MOVED BY THE WIND OF THE SPIRIT

Connections are made from one transitional community to another as well. Julie Pedersen, a deacon in our campus ministry, helped coordinate a liturgical clown troupe while she was a student. Shortly after graduation, she went to work with Maria's Children, a Russian

nonprofit organization, coordinating an arts program for orphans in Moscow. Along with meeting that group's remarkable network of volunteers from around the globe, Julie became part of the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy (MPC). Founded in 1962, this was known for many years as "the embassy church." The diverse congregation now embraces students, business people, refugees, diplomats, and ordinary Russians. Worshipers include people from some 20 countries. Through its many ministries, MPC reaches out to disadvantaged people who face discrimination daily. Julie's time there has been a wonderful discovery of yet one more sailboat on these baptismal waters. She shared her joy as she led a group of us through Moscow on a service learning mission trip during a recent spring break.

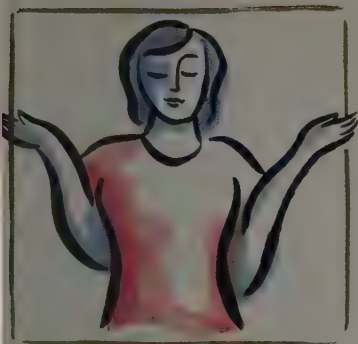
These glimpses of the transitional communities that sail the waters of our world bring life to our call to be light and salt in the world. Whether our vantage point is the deck of one of the church's great ocean liners, a small sailboat on the lake, or a raft on a stormy sea, we know the presence of Jesus in our midst. We hear the call to act boldly as disciples in the faith, the song of the wind of the Spirit in our sails. 🌸

Kathy Fick serves at Christus Rex Lutheran Campus Center at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks.

celebrating 100 years of campus ministry

The transitional community of Lutheran Campus Ministry is celebrating its 100th birthday this year. Go to www.lcang.org/campusministry to find out more about this mission of the church and how you can be a part of it.





LET US PRAY

Counting Blessings

by Debra K. Farrington

It was a lousy day. I was having the kind of day Alexander had in Judith Viorst's children's book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Everything went wrong for Alexander. He dropped his sweater in the sink while the water was running. He had to sit in the middle seat of the car on the way to school. There was no dessert in his lunch sack. An elevator door shut on his toe. These, and many other miseries, led him to conclude that he should move to Australia where, presumably, life was better.

Well, it was one of those days for me. The details don't matter; in fact, I'm trying to forget them. We've all had days like Alexander's, and probably will again before our time on earth is over. The only thing I know to do on those icky days is to count my blessings. That doesn't necessarily take care of the problem at hand, but it makes me feel better.

The suggestion to count our blessings can sound a little Pollyanna-ish. Too often people tell us to do it so we can realize how much better our life is than someone else's. For me, however, counting blessings isn't a contest. Knowing that someone else is suffering more than I am doesn't actually cheer me up.

I make a list of the many blessings in my life not to convince myself that I'm more fortunate than someone else, or that life is actually all rosy, but to restore perspective on my life as a whole. Counting my blessings helps me remember that God is always present, in good times and in bad.

No matter how horrible our day is, it is just a bad day, or a week, or year, in a life that is otherwise richly blessed. After all, even God has bad times. (You can read about many of them in the Bible!) Each of us, like many people in Scripture, have probably managed to give God at least one headache. And yet, God persists in loving and blessing, no matter what.

The next time you're having one of those lousy days, take a time out and make a list of your blessings. You can probably list a handful of them immediately; they might include enough food for today, a place to live, or other things that meet our most pressing survival needs. Stay with the practice, and dig a bit deeper. What about the chrysanthemums blooming in your yard? Or that great book you just read? The kind word a neighbor or friend gave to you today? Or the gift of assistance you provided for someone else? Remember that God is present and blessing us in all these gifts and many others.

At the end of Viorst's book, Alexander's mother reminds him that some days are just lousy, even in Australia. But the lousy parts of my life are only a part of the whole, not the whole itself. A quick count of the many blessings of your life can serve as a helpful reminder of all God's gifts to you, even on the days when they seem most absent. 🌿

Debra K. Farrington is the author of eight books of Christian spirituality and an experienced retreat leader and speaker. Check out her Web site at www.debrafarrington.com.



*"And so completion.
Full circle. What all of
us want for ourselves
and for people we love.
The fullness of time and
peace and laughter in
the golden hours at
the end of a long,
full day."*

Our Little Days

by Martha Sterne

My husband's mother died early, early on a spring morning a few months ago. She was 90 years old, and she died in her sleep in her own bed at peace with her children and ready and eager to go to Jesus and the crowd of family and friends who had left her behind. Pretty wonderful, and who would ask for more?

Helen Hopkins Sterne had a lucky life. By the way, I would have never called her Helen to her face; I called her Mrs. Sterne for years, for she and my father-in-law were most comfortable on a last-name basis. Then after 10 or 15 years or so in the family, I just starting saying "hey!" or whatever without using her name. Or I called her Granny, which is what our children called her.

She was born into an old Atlanta family with some money. Her father had a drinking problem and never worked a day in his life. But he got off the sauce eventually, and not to have worked for a living in his day and among his crowd was not unusual.

Except for the war years, my mother-in-law lived in a graceful neighborhood of beautiful homes and green lawns. She married a trustworthy, steady man who became a respected banker and civic leader. She had all she wanted, but she never lived extravagantly. And she enjoyed extraordinary health and lots of laughter. She birthed five children who, to date, have

held down jobs and kept mates and managed to stay out of jail. (Okay, there was that night in the Dacula, Georgia, jail after a Georgia football game but we wuz framed.)

Imperfect in the detail

Her grandchildren and great-grandchildren adored her. Usually.

Many mornings she walked across Peachtree Road to the 7:30 Mass at the Cathedral of Christ the King. Her faith was something she didn't talk much about. She just did the Mass and trusted that God and the priests would work out the rest.

She was both very generous in deed and occasionally very cruel in words. I stayed pretty much away from her because I don't know how to take the kind of kidding she dished out, but I noticed that I was happy to spend the money she gave us or to be associated with her generosity to causes around town.

After her husband died in 1987, she tried to become the ruling matriarch of the family. Briefly. I think she made her power play out of genuine anxiety that with him gone, somebody needed to take the helm. For instance, she told me to quit seminary because it was "abnormal," and she told my husband he was abnormal, too, for letting me go to seminary. We basically all said "yeah, yeah," and just kept on with our lives. She gave up her attempts

at leadership of the clan after a few months, and that was good.

She said things that would make your blood curdle. Negative stuff. However, from the '60s on, coming from a world in which the only people of color she knew were servants, she followed her husband right into the heart of the desegregation of Atlanta, supporting his development of an integrated circle of city leaders.

She talked a lot about the horrible things that happened in the world—murders and crashes and so forth. She really did have kind of an addiction to negativity. I never could tell whether she worried about terrible events or enjoyed the thrill of catastrophe—probably some combination of both. She did love the sound of fire engines.

She had a couple of false starts on dying. She had some dizzy spells, probably little strokes, and she had a drug reaction when, during a bout of insomnia, she took all the pills that anyone had ever prescribed for her for anxiety or as a sleep aid. But after going into the hospital and getting de-toxed, she was back better than new.

Then she broke her hip last winter and she was convinced that this was the end. She laid on the little emergency-room gurney and shut her eyes and folded her arms over her chest and said, "I'm going home to my sweetheart." Her doc-

tor, who was also her great-nephew, said, "Aunt Helen, actually you are doing great," and she was disgusted with that. But she did do really well, and she was walking like a champ in a few weeks.

The lions and lambs celebrate life

Then she died. In her sleep. At peace. Happy mostly. A charmed life, mostly. Ninety years old. Really, what more could you ask for?

We put in the paper for people to come to her place on Sunday night to greet the five children before the funeral on Monday. A platoon of cousins marshaled themselves and brought everything wonderful to eat in the world, including some recipes out of the Mississippi Delta funeral cookbook entitled *Being Dead Is No Excuse*, which offers fabulous fare.

Our huge extended family had been somewhat rent asunder by the blessing of the same-gender union of a universally dearly beloved young cousin. Some branches were united in support, and some branches were united against, and there was a lot of pain. Well, we just forgot all that and the lions and the lambs scurried around setting out tenderloin biscuits and stuffed eggs and fruit bowls and gorgeous cheeses and beautiful cakes and more, because our family needed a big old beauti-

ful feast. And so everybody forgot all their theologies because you know the end of the day, what matters is our relatedness, not our opinions, and what matters is gathering together and thanking God for life, not telling each other what God thinks. For truly, God will be who God will be, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts no matter how right we think we are. And at important moments, thank God, we all know that.

And so after a gorgeous day, the sun was going down and the light became golden and clear like it does in the spring, and we were up in her apartment on the 27th floor floating in the crystal air. Looking out the glass wall of windows, you could see the beginnings of the spine of the Appalachian Mountains rising 60 miles away to the north and the cars were streaming like a river on Peachtree Road down below.

Legendary character

And the people poured in—every age, every stage, every sort, every condition. For it is true, Helen Sterne was a legendary character. And there they came—cherishing their memories and looking for their circles of friends and looking for the bar. Our children were the bartenders, and they deserve the medal of honor because at an old

lady's wake in that crowd, whew.

Every once in a while you'd hear a cry of joy and see an embrace of people who had just lost each other in time and in the space of that big city. My mother-in-law would have loved every second of the party. And then when it was over she would have collapsed into a big, soft, chintz-covered chair in the living room and she would have kicked off her shoes and said, "Oh Lord, my dogs are barking," and she would have led the laughter as the family remembered this and that.

Unanswered questions

That same weekend, about two or three miles away, another crowd gathered. This one gathered very early in the morning in unfathomable shock and pain. A bus filled with a baseball team of Mennonite college students was heading down I-75 to Florida and the driver thought he was in the through lane but he had gotten onto an exit ramp and the bus just went up the exit and up and up and over the guard rail and it fell back down on the expressway on its side like a huge, wounded bird.

Six dead in the flash and crash of a moment. Now seven. Young bodies torn to shreds. The captain of the team, the class clown, the bus driver, his wife who just wanted to get out of the Ohio cold

and spend a few days in the sun. Out of nowhere. In the dark of the early morning—lives lost not in the fullness of time, not with peace and laughter in the golden hours at the end of the day. Lives just lost and the waves of grief rolled up that expressway for a thousand miles and will circle out in the lives of the survivors for as long as they live.

And that is so confusing and terrifying for us. Why does stuff like that happen? People asked Jesus that all the time. Why did God let Pilate murder those particular people? Were they worse than us? And why did the tower fall on these other people and not somebody else? Were they worse sinners?

Now I wish I could understand and find peace and comfort when I think about one person living to 90 in peace and plenty and others falling off an expressway bridge and dying in chaos and pain before they even got out of school. That just makes no sense. And nobody, not even Jesus, answers the question.

We just don't know the answer to all that. But we believe that God is the answer. And that God loves us steadfastly. And that our death, the end of our little days—be they long and peaceful or turbulent and cut off—is not the end of us, which I believe is why Jesus often just refused to act like the end of our little days was all that important. He dilly-dallied around for two or

three days before he went to see his dying, then dead friend Lazarus. Jesus just does not focus on the end. Instead, I think Jesus saw and pointed beyond our little days all the way to a golden circle and peace and laughter, and that Jesus is our way there and our truth along the way and our life into eternity.

Family circle

For as my mother-in-law knew, and as all those young men either knew or know now, our life is in God—endless and golden and catastrophe-free and full of laughter forever. I picture them having met by now—my mother-in-law and the Mennonite boys. She loosens them up and has them eating out of the palm of her hand, laughing and carrying on. They call her Helen and they call my father-in-law Billy, and they tell her don't be such a snob and they kid her out of her addiction to negativity. They love each other—the Mennonite boys and my mother-in-law—and all the people they love who had already gone on before. And they go from strength to strength, dancing ever closer, ever deeper into the ever-widening family circle in the golden light at the heart of God. 🌿

The Rev. Martha Sterne is associate rector at 'Holy Innocents' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, and author of *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary: Stories of the Incarnation*.



HEALTH WISE

Don't Be Duped by Drug Ads

by Molly M. Ginty

One woman laughs

easily at a party, freed from a social anxiety disorder by her new medication.

A second woman dances in a flowing purple gown, promoting a prescription stomach drug.

A third woman dozes as a golden butterfly floats above, suggesting the rest and relaxation that can come with the help of a popular sleep aid.

All these are the subjects of direct-to-consumer ads, many of which are aimed at women.

"Ads such as these promote women's products or take into account the fact that many women serve as primary caregivers and make health care decisions for their families," said Barbara Brenner, executive director of Breast Cancer Action. "With their reassuring settings and soft background music, these ads often have a female focus."

Flooding magazines, newspapers, radio, and television, direct-to-consumer drug ads are a \$4.8 billion-a-year business that has seen a 15-fold spending increase in the past decade. But according to critics, these commercials may pose a hazard to women—the very audience at whom they are targeted.

Worry number one? Lax oversight. "Direct-to-consumer drug ads are not under careful review by the Food and Drug Administration or any other agency," said Deborah Socolar, co-director of the Health Reform Program at the Boston University School of Public Health. "Often, these ads promote products about which relatively little is known."

Worry number two? Health problems created when these drugs are rushed to market before their safety and efficacy are established. Such was the case with Vioxx, a painkiller introduced in 1999 through commercials narrated by a female voice. In 2004, Vioxx saw the largest prescription drug recall in history after researchers discovered it doubled the risk of heart attack, the number one killer of U.S. women.

Worry number three? Misrepresentation of the facts. "Consider Celebrex," said Cindy Pearson, president of the National Women's Health Network. "Ads for this arthritis drug showed women practicing tai chi, movement that would be impossible for most arthritis patients." Critics say that such deception is common, and note that a recent UCLA study found that many direct-to-consumer ads exaggerate their products' effects.

Other concerns? Though drug companies say that direct-to-consumer ads educate the public about health, women's activists say that they may actually undermine our health. "These ads can harm the doctor-patient relationship, pressure physicians to prescribe certain drugs, and lead to the inappropriate use of medications," said Judy Norsigian, executive director of Our Bodies, Our-Selves, a health education organization.

Worries such as these have prompted a consortium of 39 women's and health organizations to pressure Congress to either ban drugs ads or subject them to a 3 percent tax and the inclusion of consumer warnings that indicate whether

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.

they have been tested on fewer than 3,000 people. The American Medical Association is lobbying drug companies to delay ads for new products until their safety and efficacy are established. And the Institute of Medicine is recommending that a special symbol such as a black triangle be used to label new drugs or drug combinations for the first two years, during which there should be restrictions on advertising.

How did drug ads become so contentious that mainstream health groups object to them? It all started with a 1997 policy change at the FDA. Previously, the agency required that ads for prescription drugs include nearly all warning label information—a mandate that made these ads prohibitively long to run on radio or television. But 10 years ago, new regulations allowed advertisers to name the product and disease and, instead of providing complete information on side effects, simply give major risks and additional sources of information such as Web sites.

Within months, drug commercials—the majority of them aimed at women—inundated media outlets. The ads generated ever-higher revenues, and today, prescription-drug spending is the fastest-growing sector of U.S. health care. Each year, more than 8.5 million Americans receive prescriptions for drugs they learn about through commercials. In a single decade, the total number of drug prescriptions has jumped more than 70 percent; average prescription prices have spiked from \$29 to \$64; and annual pre-

scriptions per capita have nearly doubled, from seven to 12.

Unless authorities put stricter limits on direct-to-consumer commercials (which are banned in every country except the United States and New Zealand), how should women deal with drug ads? Health advocates recommend sticking with tried-and-true prescription medications until new ones have been on the market for three years. Educate yourself—and talk to your doctor—about each drug's side effects and contraindications. And above all, don't believe the hype.

"Drug ads feature sexy, smiling women walking by the lake, rolling around with their children, or out on hot dates," said Kathleen Slattery-Moschkau, writer and director of the 2006 documentary *Money Talks: Profits before Patient Safety*. "They convince us that we, too, can be this happy, this sexy, and this beautiful if only we take this pill. But true health means accepting yourself as you are. It means having accurate information and using it to make informed choices." 🌸

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For more information go to the Web site, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (www.ourbodiesourselves.org/ book). Look at chapter 31, "The Politics of Women's Health," then at the section titled "Direct to Consumer Advertising."



by Sue Gamelin

bless you!

We don't like leaky things. Diapers, coffee cups, bladders, and roofs aren't supposed to leak. When they do, we are annoyed, irritated, and sometimes outraged. Friends shouldn't tell others the things we tell them in confidence. Government officials aren't supposed to share privileged information with the press. Leaky boats are a particular concern. My daughter says that one day she'll tell me about the time she was sailing to the Dry Tortugas with some college buddies when—yes, you've guessed it. She said something about swimming the last stretch to land. I'm not sure I want to hear the whole story.

But things do leak. Sometimes those leaky things are only annoying. It is annoying when, not just the diapers, but also the jammies and the sheets and the crib pad have to be changed. The day shouldn't start with the irritation of wiping up coffee from the kitchen floor and the table and our slacks. Anybody out there know the inconvenience of leaky bladders? I'll bet someone does. Annoying.

But leaking can be more than annoying. I know a congregation that closed down because a horrendously leaking roof couldn't be fixed after two decades of trying. That is when annoying turns into destructive. Destructive is cancer that metastasizes, a leaked secret that becomes fuel for malicious gos-

sip, and security information that has seeped into the hands of those who use it for evil.

full-circle blessings

We live in a world of leaks that are sometimes messy and sometimes dangerous. But in this reality, we are called to be leakers of another sort. We are called to be blessing leakers. We are called to leak blessings all over the annoyance of messes and spills. We are called to let holy blessings leak into lives made "holey" by cancer or character assassination or terrorism. We are called to be blessing-leakers for those whose lives seem to be nothing but stories of loss.

God made the role of blessing-leaker clear to Abraham. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. . . . In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3). Jesus made the role of blessing-leaker unmistakable to his disciples: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:34b-36).

Disciples bless others. They leak onto others the blessings that they have received from God, pouring them all over the hungry and the thirsty, the stranger and the sick, the poverty-stricken and the prisoner, the weary and the war-torn. And then the blessing comes full circle. The blessed and the blessing-leakers are blessed again when they inherit the new heaven and the new earth God promises. "Woo, woo!" we cry out with joy, along with Fred, who "woo, woos" from the choir loft in our rather dignified congregation when the good news of the Gospel hits him hard.

blessed encounters

How do we go about leaking blessings? The Bible study for 2007-2008 by Martha Stortz begins with this September issue of *Lutheran Woman Today*. It is a remarkable guidebook for us as we grow in our role as Jesus' blessing-leakers. Stortz will leak blessings all over our lives with her study. Watered by her words, we will grow in our discipleship and pour blessings over the lives of others with the river of life that flows from our baptisms into the new Jerusalem. She will remind us again and again, as she does in this session of the Bible study, that "blessings leak, as the blessed become a blessing."

We can learn from Rob, too, about how to be a blessing-leaker.

Rob is a member of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in High Point, North Carolina, where I am blessed to serve. He often travels away from High Point for his job. As he makes his way around whatever town he's in, Rob has set a terrific goal for himself: Every day, he wants to make at least one person aware that they are valued by him and by God. Rob leaks blessings all over seatmates on the plane, clients, taxi drivers, food servers, bellhops, housecleaning staff, and folks standing with him on a corner waiting for the light to change. He might ask with unusual intention how their day is going. He may wonder about a book that they are reading or ask about signs posted in their cabs. He may give a warm thank-you to someone not used to being noticed. He may be kind to someone who is rude, gentle with someone who is brusque, calm with someone anxious, patient with those who are impatient, helpful to those who are supposed to be, but don't feel like being, helpful.

One amazing day, Rob ran into another member of our congregation in an airport a thousand miles from her home. He was there on business. She was there because of a call that her mother had had a stroke. When Joni saw Rob, the

anxiety and tears she'd been trying to hold inside burst out. She knew that she could trust Rob. She knew that he was someone who blesses others with understanding and kindness. Rob's surprised smile, warm concern, and gentle hug eased her mind and heart. "What a blessing he was to me," she says even to this day as she remembers that unexpected and blessed encounter.

urging them to work for peace and justice for our global community and its environment. We pray and pray and pray and pray. We give and give and give and give. We know how to bless others as we have been blessed.

And at the same time, God calls us to expand our role as blessing-leakers. We know that we can grow both in our ability and in our will-



"It's not about me! It's about God."

it's not about me

We already are blessing-leakers. We hold cups of cold water to the lips of people in hospital and nursing home beds. We wipe babies' bottoms with all the love and patience we can muster. We hold out our hands to help someone get into a car seat or out of a wheelchair. We teach English to refugees and fill their homes with the things they need for a new beginning. We sit and talk with that person whom people avoid. We wipe away tears, both ours and those of the ones with whom we mourn. We write letters and send e-mails to officials,

ingness to leak blessings, just as the world seems to grow in incidents of danger and harm. Massacres on college campuses and in suburban bedrooms stun and horrify us, wars and rumors of wars rock the world, headlines call our attention to dishonesty among public officials, HIV/AIDS sickens every corner of the world, and the faces of hungry and frightened children break our hearts. We are called to change this world. We are the people we've been waiting for!

How do we begin growing in our calling to be blessing-leakers? Above all of our acts of blessing, we

must fly a very important banner. That banner makes clear that our actions aren't about us. They're not about earning points with God or our neighbors. Blessing-leaking is not about helping out those whom we look down on, the ones who "don't manage life quite as well as we do." Our banner must read, "It's not about me! It's about God." Indeed, "it's not about me, it's not

ters the people he encountered on the dusty roads and in the humble villages. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me," he said poignantly to the blessing-leakers of Matthew 25:34. I tell the homeless, beaten-down, red-eyed, recovering drug addicts whom I sit with each week at the men's shelter that we

each particular individual. That's what Jesus did. He noticed a bent-over woman. He ran into a tear-stained widow following in her son's funeral procession. He spoke wise and discerning words to an angry, rock-bearing crowd and to a disgraced woman. He searched for the hurting one who had touched him. He told the forces of evil to jump over the cliff and into the lake. He peered into the darkness of a blind man.

Jesus fed the hungry, calmed the anxious, loved the children, spoke words of forgiveness to the estranged, and worked to change the power structure of society so that the last are first. Look at those examples of Jesus' ministry of blessing.

What is remarkable is this: We can do all of these things too. Just as Jesus leaked blessings, so can we, and so can we grow in our blessing-leaking as the world grows in need of it.

God will help us as we grow. God will never let us down. God blesses us. God blesses us to be a blessing. And then the blessed and blessing-leakers are blessed again by life together as God's family. ✠
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"We're all loved.

We're all called to do better—much better.

And God will help us."

about me, it's not about me" is an important refrain for us to chant every day of our lives. And then we glance up at our banner to find the second half of our daily chant: "It's about God, it's about God, it's about God."

Jesus' m.o. should be ours

On whom do we leak God's blessings? We do as Jesus did and as Christ would have us do now, with the Holy Spirit's power unfurling our banner as we go.

What was Jesus' modus operandi, his "m.o." as he blessed people? He recognized as brothers and sis-

ters the people he encountered on the dusty roads and in the humble villages. They are my brothers. I am their sister. God is the head of our family. I have the joy of leaking all over my brothers the blessed news that God loves us and wants only health and wholeness for us. "We're all broken," I declare. "We're all loved. We're all called to do better—much better. And God will help us."

Chanting, "it's not about me, it's about God," we look into the dazed eyes, sullen expressions, and anxious faces of those around us and pray for God's help in figuring out what kind of blessing will help

Morning, Evening, and Night Prayer



by Julie K. Ageson

Mighty God of mercy,
we thank you for
the resurrection dawn,
bringing the glory of our
risen Lord who makes
every day new . . .

Daily Prayer, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*

In a small, quiet room lit by soft lamplight and one large candle—a spare place conveying a sense of the sacred—a group of friends gathers again for conversation and catching up. At the beginning and the end of their time together, there is silence and prayer. And while the conversations and catching up are at the center of their intertwined lives, the silence at the beginning and the Night Prayer at the end have become bookends providing a rhythm and a pattern that shape and define the group.

Most of us long to be better “pray-ers,” often lamenting our sporadic and sometimes lame attempts at regular times for prayer. A deeper, more disciplined and meaningful life of prayer can seem elusive. We’d like to be more attentive to the

practices of prayer we know to be central to the life of the world, the church, and our own fragmented lives. We're usually good about calling to God when things go badly or life is particularly threatening. And hopefully, prayers of thanksgiving and joy also are regular practices. But sometimes we struggle with the personal and private prayers that can seem self-absorbed or that seem to function as if we have a special pipeline to the Holy One.

Daily prayers of the church

Perhaps the daily prayers of the church, the ancient patterns of Morning, Evening, and Night Prayer, can help us reclaim a rhythm of prayer a bit different from private and personal prayer. This recognition of the importance of patterns of prayer, particularly at the beginning and end of each day, prompted the inclusion of "Daily Prayer" in the ELCA's new worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

Just as each day begins with the rising of the sun and closes with its setting, Morning Prayer—sometimes called Matins—and Evening and Night Prayer—called Vespers and Compline—remind us that each day mirrors the dying and rising of Christ and Christ's life in all of us as baptized Christians. The structure of Daily Prayer takes its shape from the paschal mystery of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. As

with all the liturgies of the church, it conveys the passage of time marked by the order of the week and the patterns of dying and rising that echo and make present the mystery of Christ.

In the same way, Daily Prayer invites us to join our personal life of prayer to the community's prayer. Using the great storehouse of Scripture, including the poetry of the psalms and the rich texts of hymns, Daily Prayer joins our voices to those of all the ages. It can open a wider door and a way of marking each day, enriching and emboldening our individual prayers.

The church gives us this pattern as one way of getting beyond our personalized, privatized lives. Liturgical prayer—the prayers of the people worshiping together—can help us become the Body of Christ, the "we" that cares for and engages the common good that the spirit of God wishes for the whole creation. It invites us to join together with our family, our spouse, a friend, or neighbors to begin and end the day in God's presence.

As with the group of friends mentioned earlier, this common prayer may happen only in the evening, weekly, or even monthly. For others it may be a morning ritual or a practice for Advent or Lent. It can also become the communal prayer for meetings or small groups we attend. When it isn't possible

to pray with others, we can join our individual voices to the Daily Prayer being offered by the larger church, uniting ourselves with the whole Body of Christ.

Liturgy of the Hours

The ancient model of the Liturgy of the Hours is the pattern for Daily Prayer. Practiced in many traditions, this common prayer gives Christians a shape to our days. It generally includes two services of music, readings from Scripture, and prayers in a variety of forms. The church's song might include hymns and antiphonal singing of psalms. Scripture can take the form of spoken word, sung canticles, or silent reflection on texts. Texts and prayers might focus on the season of the church year or the daily lectionary readings. Blessings and an offering of peace are sometimes included.

The Daily Prayer of the church is another of the fires around which we all can gather. Their light and their warmth help unite us with Christians around the world to acknowledge Christ's saving acts, his life and death among us, and God's overwhelming love and grace for all of creation. Morning, Evening, and Night Prayer can provide another way of bearing Christ and becoming the Body of Christ for the sake of the world. Perhaps author Gail Ramshaw says it best in

her book, *Under the Tree of Life* (Continuum, 1999): "Liturgical prayer is not about the me who is, but about the us whom faith hopes we become."

Another week has gone by and the group that gathers around lamplight and candlelight has come together again to share silence, the ups and downs of life, and the beautiful words of Night Prayer (see opposite page).

At the close of evening, their time together is marked by the rhythm and patterns of prayer that continue to shape and form them into Christ's presence in the world, the very Body of Christ. 🌿

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EVERY INVESTMENT PROVIDES A STATEMENT. OURS MAKES ONE.

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Night Prayer

Lord,
it is night.
The night is for stillness.
Let us be still in the presence
of God.

It is night after a long day.
What has been done has been done;
What has not been done has not been done;
Let it be.

The night is dark.
Let our fears of the darkness of the world
and of our own lives
rest in you.

The night is quiet.
Let the quietness of your peace enfold us,
all dear to us,
and all who have no peace.

The night heralds the dawn.
Let us look expectantly to a new day,
new joys,
new possibilities.

In your name we pray. Amen.

A New Zealand Prayer Book (Harper San Francisco, 1997), p. 184.

Resources

These books are available online from www.augsburgfortress.org, www.half.com, or www.amazon.com.

A beautiful trilogy of prayer manuals that celebrate Daily Prayer can be found in Phyllis Tickle's *The Divine Hours*. Each day's prayers, psalms, readings, and refrains can be found in *Prayers for Summertime*, *Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime*, and *Prayers for Springtime* (Doubleday, 2000, 2001). Readers may like to read about Tickle's experience of Daily Prayer or fixed-hour prayer at www.explorefaith.org/prayer/fixed.

An Everyday Book of Hours by William G. Storey is a lovely collection of Morning and Evening Prayer arranged in four-week cycles (Liturgy Training Publications, 2001).

A Seasonal Book of Hours also by William G. Storey contains Morning and Evening prayer for Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter (Liturgy Training Publications, 2001).

For helpful background about Daily Prayer and the practice of the Daily Office, readers may like to refer to Gordon Lathrop's *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Fortress, 1998).

Evangelical Lutheran Worship continues the Lutheran practice of Daily Prayer, providing orders for Morning, Evening, Night, and responsive Prayer (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

Aelred-Seton Shanley's *Hymns for Morning and Evening Prayer* follows the church year with its meaningful collection of hymns and texts that can be sung in simple chant settings (Liturgy Training Publications, 1999).

A New Zealand Prayer Book contains extraordinarily beautiful collections of texts for use in Daily Prayer (Harper San Francisco, 1997).

For a more in-depth introduction to the Liturgy of the Hours, you may want to refer to Charles Edward Miller's *Together in Prayer: Learning to Love the Liturgy of the Hours* (Alba House, 1994) or Robert Taft's *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West* (Liturgical Press, 1986).

A Book of Hours by Thomas Merton and edited by Kathleen Deignan uses Merton's writings as a source of prayer and contemplation (Ave Maria Press, 2007).



BIBLE STUDY

BLESSED TO FOLLOW: THE BEATITUDES
AS A COMPASS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

SESSION 1

Count Your Blessings, Hold Fast to the Promise

by Martha E. Stortz

See a video clip of author Martha E. Stortz
introducing Session 1 of this Bible study at
www.lutheranwomantoday.org

Theme verses

Matthew 5:3-12

Opening

Hymn "Blest Are They," *With One Voice* 764,
Evangelical Lutheran Worship 728

Prayer

Gracious God, we bless you,
for you are the fount and source of all goodness;
and you have created us, claimed us, and named us;
Fill our mouths with your praise;
Fill our hearts with your love;
Fill our hands with your purpose.
You invite us to ask for what we need,
and today we ask for these particular needs:
(Invite petitions)
We pray in the strong name of Jesus,
your Son, our Brother.
Amen.

Introduction

"Guess what the first words out of her mouth were?!"
I never did find out, since I picked up this shred of
conversation as I hurried through the airport. As my
plane lifted into the clouds, I reflected on the signifi-
cance of first words. We're fascinated by them; they
promise to unlock a mystery.

In Matthew's Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount
inaugurates Jesus' public ministry, and the first word
out of Jesus' mouth is "blessed." He repeats this word
throughout his first sermon. In using the word *blessea*
Jesus reaches back to Old Testament stories of bless-
ing in the creation (Genesis 1:1-2:3) and in the call
of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). At the same time, he
reaches forward to his final sermon and the last words
of his public ministry (Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus
places our Christian discipleship squarely in the midst
of blessing. As he speaks, he introduces himself to us
for he is both the one blessing and the one blessed.

He also introduces disciples to themselves, for the Beatitudes offer a character sketch of who disciples will become if they follow him. The Beatitudes are a compass for the journey of Christian discipleship.

Numbering our days

We count calories; we count out the day's pills or vitamin supplements; we count down the days to vacation or the minutes until quitting time. Along with all these everyday countdowns, we have more serious systems of calculation. We count grudges; we keep track of slights. We count American, Afghani, and Iraqi casualties in the war on terror; we count upticks and downturns in the stock market; we count a mounting national deficit and a growing trade imbalance.

When someone asks us, "how are you doing?" which measurement should we use? Should we respond in terms of how close we are to quitting time? Should we enumerate our grudges? Whether we count market points or minutes left in the working day makes a huge difference. Suddenly the psalmist's plea carries a certain urgency: "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart" (Psalm 90:12).

Jesus' First Words

READ MATTHEW 5:3-12.

In his first big public appearance in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus outlines a new math—counting the blessings: Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . blessed are those who mourn . . . blessed are the meek . . . blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . .

The Beatitudes describe a country of blessing, and there is something both holy and terrifying about Jesus' blessings. These are not sought-after states. We'd prefer to be "healthy, wealthy, and wise," as Benjamin Franklin put it. Mourning, meekness, poverty, and persecution—not on your life! If Jesus were recruiting followers, these blessings would not move people to sign up. Yet the words accurately describe the lives

of too many of the world's people. Sorrow and oppression, hunger and thirst, persecution everywhere: the realities overwhelm us. So what's going on in Jesus' first sermon? His first words give us a clue.

1. How has a blessing that you have experienced shaped your life as a disciple? For example, perhaps you were blessed to grow up in a loving, Christian home, and that shapes how you treat people today.

The Beatitudes also describe a country of call and promise. Jesus does not bless commandments or invitations; he calls and blesses *people*. Moreover, Jesus blesses people by sharing our lot—and reversing it. He takes our curse into his body, blessing it. In blessing, he becomes our hope.

For example, Jesus calls those who mourn and absorbs their tears; he offers the comfort mourners need. Jesus is merciful; indeed, he is mercy made flesh.

2. Look at the calls: Do these seem like blessings to you? Why or why not?

3. Look at the promises: Are the promises worth the blessings? Why or why not?

And third, the Beatitudes describe a country of suffering and healing. Scholars treat the first eight Beatitudes as a distinct unit. They are all cast in the third person plural ("those who"), in contrast with the ninth Beatitude, which is phrased in the second person ("you"). Further, the same promise opens and closes the unit: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

4. The Beatitudes describe suffering and healing. During the course of a lifetime, we will all probably get to know both. Where would you locate yourself right now? In suffering or healing?

*Or both? Where have you experienced blessing?
Can you hear the promise—even a whisper of
promise?*

Eavesdropping on Other Biblical Conversations

In his first sermon, Jesus reaches back to the blessings and curses in the creation and in the call of Abraham. At the same time, he reaches forward to the blessings and curses of his final sermon in Matthew's Gospel. In this reaching forward and reaching back, he catches disciples up in an embrace of blessing.

Creation's First Words:

Echoes of Blessing in the Old Testament

READ GENESIS 1:1—2:3.

Read this passage aloud with a different person reading each day of creation.

"Like father, like son," the saying goes, and Jesus' first words echo the Creator's. Genesis 1 shows the work of creation to be a shower of blessings. God surveys each day's work and blesses it. Indeed, if the creation were a song, its refrain would be "and God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

Creation's blessings call order out of chaos, separating and distinguishing elements of the cosmos: light from darkness, earth from sea and sky, sun from moon and stars. God blesses with naming, then passes the pleasure of naming on to Adam, and "whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Genesis 2:19). God assigns each of these newly named creatures a place to inhabit. There are creatures specially created to fly in the skies, to swim in the seas, and to crawl on the earth. Blessing knits creation together in a unity of peace.

**5. How does naming a person, a pet, a ship,
even a house or a car, bless the one
that is named?**

**6. What sort of honor is bestowed or received
by naming, even nicknaming something?**

**7. How does naming someone or something
call order out of chaos?**

READ GENESIS 12:1–3 AND GENESIS 22:16–18.

**Abraham is blessed in order that he might be a
blessing to others.**

The blessing of Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3; Genesis 22:16–18) repeats and amplifies the blessings of the first days of creation. Again God calls order out of chaos, sending Abraham on a journey. God gives no destination, only a promise: "I will make your name great." Not only does God bless Abraham, but God makes him a blessing to others. After the near-sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's only shot at establishing an inheritance in his world, God repeats the promise: ". . . by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing" (Genesis 22:18). Against all odds, even against inscrutable divine commands, Abraham's blessing extends through him and his offspring across the centuries and around the world.

Old Testament blessings leak. Old Testament curses prove leaky as well. God tells Abraham that "the one who curses you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3), words that recur throughout the Old Testament. The threat reflects the ancient law of returning evil for evil, "an eye for an eye," but Christians are counseled otherwise. Jesus himself directs disciples to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44), reversing the strict reciprocity of the ancient world. The apostle Paul reminds Christians that Christ Jesus turned the old order upside-down: "When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly" (1 Corinthians 4:12–13). Paul's counsel sounds a lot like the Beatitudes. Blessing replaces cursing as the Christian response in good fortune and bad.

READ GENESIS 3:14–19.

The fall alters relationships among the creatures.

The sheer persistence of divine blessing becomes clearest in the fall. The incident with Satan and the apple does not send creation spinning back into the chaos from which it came. Divine blessings hold strong against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world” (Ephesians 6:12, KJV). Nor can blessings be revoked, as we see with Jacob, who tricks his way into a paternal blessing intended for his brother Esau (Genesis 27:1–33).

Even the curses of Genesis 3 cannot erase the blessings of Genesis 1. Rather, the fall dissolves the peace of creation, leaving conflict in its wake. Humans are set against the earth and all its creatures, even against the work of their hands. Woman is set against man and child, man against woman, the serpent against the other animals (Genesis 3:14–19). Finally, God condemns the serpent to crawling on its belly, suggesting that before the fall it walked upright. Medieval artists delighted in this image, painting the snake with feet—even an occasional walking stick! (The Flemish artist Hugo van der Goes painted one example: “Temptation and Fall” in about 1470. It hangs in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, and you can find it on the Internet.)

Sometimes when we are frustrated or angry, curses come out of our mouths before we think about what we’re saying. “Bad words” aren’t the only bad words. Even the mildest among us have muttered such things as “Oh, dry up!”

3. Imagine cursing someone. What would happen if that curse came true?

4. Now, imagine blessing that person. What happens when the blessing comes true?

Sometimes doing the right thing requires practice; yet, look at the results, both in ourselves and in others.

Old Testament blessings set the stage for Jesus’ first sermon, offering important clues to what blessing is all about. First, blessings call life into being, naming and inviting distinction; second, blessings relate things, placing parts into a divine whole; third, blessings bestow peace, allowing for unity in diversity; and finally, blessings leak, as the blessed become a blessing.

Jesus’ Last Words:

The Blessor Becomes the Blessed

READ MATTHEW 25:31–46.

A seasoned preacher once said: “You’ve got one good sermon in you—give it with gusto.” Maybe Jesus overheard his advice. His final sermon in Matthew’s Gospel recalls his first, but reveals that the one who blesses joins the ranks of the blessed. Traditionally known as “The Great Judgment,” the last words in Jesus’ public ministry could also be called “Revisiting the Beatitudes,” because here he reveals himself as one who hungers and thirsts, one who is meek and mournful, naked and sick and imprisoned. Repetition renders the message more powerful: “I was hungry.... I was thirsty.... I was a stranger.... I was naked.... I was sick.... Just as you did it to one of the least of these..., you did it to me” (Matthew 25:35–36, 40).

Jesus’ final sermon shows him in solidarity with those he blessed in his first sermon. Jesus not only feels people’s pain, he shares it, bearing their burden and finding in it blessing. Moreover, the last words identify the source of the blessing: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father . . .” (Matthew 25:34).

Blessed disciples become a blessing for others. Jesus’ last sermon repeats his first sermon—and look at what has happened! The disciples have been swept into God’s plan—unaware. They ask with amazement:

“When was it that we saw you . . . ?” (Matthew 25: 37, 38, 39). Unknowingly, disciples have been caught up into the kingdom.

The Beatitudes bear blessings, and each blessing bears a promise:

“ . . . theirs is the kingdom of heaven,
 . . . they will be comforted,
 . . . they will inherit the earth,
 . . . they will be filled,
 . . . they will receive mercy,
 . . . they will see God,
 . . . they will be called the children of God,
 . . . theirs is the kingdom of heaven,
 . . . your reward is great in heaven.”

Further sessions of this Bible study will explore these promises in more detail. For now, it is important to pay attention to what Jesus does not promise. He never promises: “You will never be afraid,” but he calms our fears just as he calmed the stormy seas. Words he repeats throughout his ministry comfort nervous disciples then and now: “Fear not” and “Be not afraid.” The only words Jesus repeats more frequently than these are the words of invitation: “Follow me.” With this invitation he calls us out of a chaos of our own creation into abundant life. With blessing comes call; with the call comes blessing.

10. How can blessing someone bless you in return?

11. Name some ways you have blessed someone or been blessed.

Disciples: Blessed and Blessing

A high school graduation speaker promised that citizenship was only “a diploma away.” Distracted and distracting, the class cut-up was nudged by a more serious student: “This is who you’re going to be in a few minutes: Listen up.” The Beatitudes tell us who

we are going to be, so we listen up to this character sketch of Christian discipleship.

Here creation’s pattern is altered only slightly. The family resemblance between Father and Son is grafted onto the relationship between disciples and their Lord. As he sets his face toward Jerusalem, Jesus takes on the character of the ones he blesses. The prophet Isaiah saw this clearly: “he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4, NKJV). Jesus blesses us by sharing our lot—and reversing it. He becomes the one who is poor in spirit, the one who mourns, the meek, the one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness (Matthew 5:3–6). He takes the curse into his own body, yet even as he absorbs abuse, he ministers. He is mercy made flesh, pure in heart, the Prince of Peace, the one who is persecuted for helping others (Matthew 5:7–11). Jesus blesses, and God reveals him to be the blessing intended for the whole of creation. The apostle Paul caught this insight in own first words to the Ephesians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (Ephesians 1:3).

Like master, like disciple: Jesus’ lot will be ours. If this feels scary, that’s because it is. The Italian artist Caravaggio painted terror on the faces of two great apostles in 1600, in the paintings “The Conversion on the Way to Damascus” and “The Crucifixion of St. Peter.” Hanging across from one another in a small side chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome, the pieces stand as bookends of discipleship. These portraits of Peter and Paul show two terrified disciples, and we hear raw fear in Peter’s question to Jesus: “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (Matthew 19:27). Discipleship is not for the faint of heart. The blessings of Jesus’ first and last sermons seem less like entrance requirements than a realistic description of what disciples will find ourselves hungry and thirsty, naked and imprisoned, poor in spirit, mournful, and meek.

But just as God called out the whole of creation and blessed it, so Jesus calls out a wild and crazy crew of disciples, blesses them, and turns them in spite of themselves into a blessing for others.

Blessed by God, disciples deliver on the promise of Abraham, and spread peace to “all the families of the earth” (Genesis 12:3).

We marry “for better and for worse.” Perhaps the same is true of discipleship. How can being a disciple of Christ affect your life “for better and for worse”?

12. List some ways that following Jesus has changed your life, both for better and for (what the world might see as) worse.

Praise: A Practice of Discipleship

We all have stories of how revealing the first words out of someone’s mouth are. What are some of your stories? The psalmist was convinced that if we could speak from the heart, the first words out of our mouths would be words of blessing: “O Lord, open my lips; and my mouth will declare your praise” (Psalm 51:15).

For centuries, Christian monastics have gathered to pray in the morning upon rising from bed. After the silence of sleep, these are the first words they speak into the new day. These words have been long been spoken or sung to open the daily Divine Office, and we preserve them in our services of Morning Prayer (see page 26).

Think of the first words that usually come to your mind when you awaken in the morning: a list of things to do, a cloudburst of anxieties, a litany of aches and pains. Try waking instead by counting your blessings, beginning with the fact that you find yourself in a new day. Try ending your day the same way. See how many blessings you can number in your day. Be blessed.

- **Count your blessings. Keep track of your blessings in your journal each day.**
- **Begin your day with praise and write your prayers of praise in your journal. Pay attention to how starting your day with praise shapes your day. Share that with the group if you like.**

Closing

Prayer

Holy Jesus, you have blessed us abundantly, and as we name those blessings in our hearts, we thank you.

(Observe a time of silence.)

You have blessed us to be a blessing to others.

And as we go forth from this fellowship, we ask your blessing

upon those whose names we speak in this fellowship:

(Pause for petitions.)

Bless these your children,

and may we be a blessing to others.

We pray in your Spirit,

in whom we live and move and have our being.

Amen.

Hymn “Praise God from whom All Blessings Flow,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 884, 885; *Lutheran Book of Worship* 564, 565

Looking ahead

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Poverty takes many forms: the gnawing ache of hunger, the ravages of disease, the brittleness of emotional need, the fear of spiritual abandonment. Attend to the poverty around you and within you. Behold it—and bless it. Listen to the promise of this Beatitude. 🌿

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Rooted in God's Rich Blessings

by Esther Menn



Blessing as a way of life in relationship with God is part of the heritage that Christians share with the Jewish people. Our origins within first-century Judaism have imparted many insights about God's abundant gifts for human flourishing and for peace and wholeness in our world. Although our religious communities have developed distinctive perspectives and practices over the centuries, both Judaism and Christianity remain deeply rooted in God's rich blessings.

Consider the greeting that Jesus heard as he entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD!" (Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13). As a Jewish man participating in the pilgrimage festival of Passover, Jesus would have understood this bless-

ing from Psalm 118:26 as an expression of welcome. In this case, the welcome came from those who recognized him as the Messiah, Son of David. Elsewhere in Scripture blessings are exchanged as greetings in ordinary circumstances. In the book of Ruth, for example, Boaz begins a conversation with his field workers with the words, "The LORD be with you!" to which they reply, "The LORD bless you!" (Ruth 2:4).

The phrase "Blessed is the one who comes" (*Baruch Ha-Ba'*) remains the ordinary way of saying "Welcome!" in modern Hebrew. When you arrive at Ben Gurion airport outside Tel Aviv, Israel, you see the words *Baruch Ha-Ba'* "Welcome!" prominently displayed on the terminal wall.

Offering a blessing as welcome is a

prayer for divine favor upon those we encounter. As Christians in a pluralistic world, our own faith calls us to hope for God's active presence in our neighbors' lives. In Jewish-Christian relations, today we are moving beyond competition and exclusive claims to understanding that both communities experience the blessing of being people of God.

Beyond competition for blessing

"Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me also, father!" (Genesis 27:38). These are the anguished words of Esau after his brother Jacob tricked him out of their father Isaac's blessing. In the history of Jewish-Christian relations, this story of competition between brothers became an important symbol. Both sides identified with Jacob, the son who receives the blessing and goes on to become "Israel."

In rabbinical scriptural commentaries going back to the second century, Esau represents the oppressive Roman empire and later the Christianized Byzantine empire. This interpretation or *midrash* develops Esau as a cruel and lawless enemy who seeks to destroy the Jewish people, symbolized by Jacob.

By contrast, the early Christian fathers saw Esau as the one who represented the Jewish people, displaced by the younger, favored son—the church. In this view, Christians, the true Israel, enjoyed the blessing

of their heavenly Father, while the Jewish people were rejected and left desolate.

But the biblical story itself points beyond the dangerous idea that God has only one blessing to give. It also challenges the simple equation between being blessed and being successful. After receiving his father's blessing, Jacob lives as a fugitive and stranger, fearful of his brother's anger and dependent on his uncle Laban's generosity. Later in Genesis 32, when he wrestles with the mysterious "man" at the Jabbok River until the man blesses him, Jacob receives both the new name Israel and a limp.

As for Esau, at the end of the story he is blessed with great wealth in the form of large herds and flocks as well as with many descendents (Genesis 36:6–43). The brothers experience an emotional reconciliation, through which Jacob recognizes the divine presence. He marvels at the favor he receives from his former rival and tells him that "to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Genesis 33:10).

This story is not just a simple tale of competition; it presents a more generous understanding of providence. Both brothers are blessed, just as both Jews and Christians are blessed as communities in relationship with God. Confident of God's abundant blessings, we are free—even obligated!—to work for

greater understanding and mutual appreciation between Christians and Jews. In the reconciliation of our communities of faith, we share glimpses of the face of God.

Blessings of the Jewish New Year

As Christians continue to enjoy the long season of Pentecost through the fall months, the Jewish community observes High Holy Days in autumn. This most sacred season starts at sunset, September 12, 2007, with the Jewish New Year: in Hebrew, *Rosh Ha-Shanah*. According to the Jewish calendar, this year marks 5,768 years from the traditional date of God's creation of the world. This connection with creation recalls the original blessing of humanity, created in the divine image (Genesis 1:28). The theme of blessing remains central to *Rosh Ha-Shanah* in the biblical reading for the day, which is Genesis 22. The story of Abraham's binding of Isaac concludes with a repetition of God's blessing of Abraham first heard in Genesis 12:2–4, and with God's promise to Abraham that "by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves" (Genesis 22:18).

In celebration of the Jewish New Year, it is traditional to eat apples dipped in honey, representing a sweet new beginning. The traditional greeting for the day expresses hope for the coming year as well

as for the time of judgment: "May you be written and inscribed in the book of life." A shorter version is "May you have a good year!" or in Hebrew, *"L'Shanah Tovah."*

God in the details

While the blessings of festivals and holy days such as the Jewish New Year are a special joy, blessings also form a regular part of the daily rhythm of Judaism. Short fixed prayers blessing God for even the ordinary things that make life possible and delightful mark each day for observant Jews. Before eating bread, for example, this blessing is spoken: "Blessed are you, LORD, our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth," and before drinking wine, this one:

"Blessed are you, LORD, our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine."

God is blessed as the source of every blessing. The range of occasions that evoke recognition of God's hand is amazingly broad. There are blessings for the stages of waking in the morning, blessings for seeing beautiful sights and witnessing natural phenomena such as lightning. There are blessings for the holy commandments that preserve and distinguish the Jewish community, such as the lighting of Sabbath candles and observing the Passover ritual family meal or *seder*. The blessing for children to be spoken by their parents on the Sabbath and other occasions acknowledges them as a precious gift not only

for the immediate family, but also for the future of Judaism. Blessing God is such a pervasive aspect of the Jewish faith that it seems only natural that one of the most often used names of God is "The Holy One, Blessed is He."

The central prayer of the synagogue also highlights the theme of blessing. This prayer, which in Orthodox congregations is spoken three times each day, is known by various names. It is called the *Amida* or "Standing Prayer," because people reciting it stand and face Jerusalem. This prayer is also called the "Eighteen Benedictions" (although a later addition brings the total to 19). These benedictions, which praise, petition, and thank God, all end with a blessing lifting up an aspect

Resources

The ELCA offers many resources to foster understanding and cooperation between Lutherans and the Jewish community, including "Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations" and a series of discussion guides called "Talking Points." All these and more are available at www.elca.org/ecumenical/interreligious/jewish.

Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community

The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on April 18, 1994, adopted the following document as a statement on Lutheran-Jewish relations:

In the long history of Christianity there exists no more tragic development than the treatment accorded the Jewish people on the part of Christian believers. Very few Christian communities of faith were able to escape the contagion of anti-Judaism and its modern successor, anti-Semitism. Lutherans belonging to the Lutheran World Federation

and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America feel a special burden in this regard because of certain elements in the legacy of the reformer Martin Luther and the catastrophes, including the Holocaust of the 20th century, suffered by Jews in places where the Lutheran churches were strongly represented.

The Lutheran communion of

of the divine nature. For example, the first benediction concludes, "Blessed are You, LORD, shield of Abraham," the second, "Blessed are You, LORD, who makes the dead live," and the third, "Blessed are You, LORD, the holy God." Praying the Eighteen Benedictions regularly helps keep blessing ever present in Judaism.

When God calls Abraham, he tells him, "you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2). This phrase can also be translated as a command: "Be a blessing!" This imperative has been influential within Judaism as a call to ethical service both within and beyond the Jewish community. With Abraham and Sarah as our common ancestors, Christians and Jews can become partners in addressing the challenges of our

time that cross religious boundaries, including social justice, ecological renewal, personal and family relationships, and interfaith reconciliation. Through our cooperation, we enter into God's promise that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Parting blessing

Lutherans today desire God's blessing on our commitment "to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people." These words come from the "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community," ratified by the ELCA Church Council in 1994 (see below for the complete text of the Declaration). The Declaration

concludes with a prayer "for the continued blessing of the Blessed One upon the increasing cooperation and understanding between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish community."

As Lutherans, we wish the Jewish community in the United States, in Israel, and in other parts of the world a sweet New Year! *L'Shanah Tovah!* 🌸

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faith is linked by name and heritage to the memory of Martin Luther, teacher and reformer. Honoring his name in our own, we recall his bold stand for truth, his earthy and sublime words of wisdom, and above all his witness to God's saving Word. Luther proclaimed a gospel for people as we really are, bidding us to trust a grace sufficient to reach our deepest shames and address the most tragic truths.

In the spirit of that truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and

the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews. As did many of Luther's own companions in the 16th century, we reject this violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations. In concert with the Lutheran World Federation, we particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day.

Grieving the complicity of our own tradition within this history of

hatred, moreover, we express our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people. We recognize in anti-Semitism a contradiction and an affront to the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling, and we pledge this church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and in the society around us. Finally, we pray for the continued blessing of the Blessed One upon the increasing cooperation and understanding between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish community.



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Rally around Rally Day

Rally Day is the start of a new year of teaching and learning in many ELCA congregations.

Most often it is a day in late August or early September that signifies the end of summer vacation and the return to Sunday school. It is a time to recognize and honor those who teach and those who learn: all who nurture faith in others.

Rally Day is a time for the entire congregation to rally behind God's intention that all Christians—children, youth, and adults—grow and learn; a day for congregations to celebrate their ministry of Christian education.

To find resources for Rally Day, go to www.elca.org and search for "Rally Day."

Faith and fitness

What does faith have to do with fitness? What's the connection between being spiritually well and physically well? Author Tom P. Hafer answers these questions in his book, *Faith and Fitness: Diet and Exercise for a Better World* (Augsburg, 2006), as he explores the connections between a strong faith and everyday choices. Filled with practical ideas about food, exercise, and wellness, the book explores the connections between real food and "living water," affluence and "feed my sheep," exercising for peace, and the relationship between a well congregation and well individuals. The book includes a theology of fitness, directions for exercises at various levels of fitness, and informative material about diet that enhances personal health and supports sustainable agricultural

practices. Order the book on-line at www.augsburgfortress.org/store.

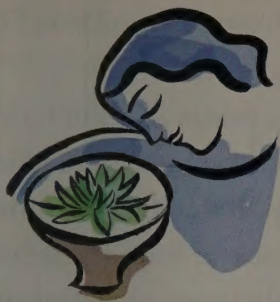
Sustaining simplicity

How does a 50-year-old Lutheran woman simplify her life? In interesting and various ways. Anne Basye, a frequent writer for *Lutheran Woman Today*, a member of Unity Lutheran Church in Chicago, mother, and dog owner, offers us insight into finding ways to live more simply in her new book, *Sustaining Simplicity: A Journal* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2007).

She owns no car, no DVD player, no microwave. A date once said to her, "Oh, I get it—you're Amish." No, just determined. For the past 15 years or so, the biggest question for her has been: "What is necessary?" Basye claims that's a different question than "How can I spend less?" or "How much can I save?"

The author offers readers insights into her life through this book. She's vulnerable, witty, and honest. A favorite part is where she scavenges ice-melting salt from the parking lot of a supermarket. "As soon as I saw it, I wanted it." So she found a discarded plastic bag and grabbed a couple of pounds.

You might not go that far, but reading her experiences is great fun. And she is working to save God's green earth, after all. Buy it on-line at www.augsburgfortress.org/store. The book is part of the simple living programming for the World Hunger Program of the ELCA. Look for leader helps at www.elca.org/hunger/simple.



GRACE NOTES

Journaling for the Soul

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



Women of the ELCA

has just introduced two journals into our line of products designed to help mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ. The first, *Living from the Heart of God: A Journal for Life's Stages*, offers reflections, devotions, and prayers on women's many life experiences and includes space for readers to record their responses. The second journal is a companion to the Bible study that begins in this issue, "Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship," and is a place where readers may record their own blessings.

Journals can hold words gathered into lists, sentences, poems, or song lyrics—or words not gathered into much at all, simply scattered across the page. A journal can hold the writer's thoughts or quotations from famous people or comments overhead in the grocery store. Some journals become diaries, recording events in the life of the writer. Other journals are more reflective. A journal isn't limited to words, of course. People often express themselves through art in their journals. Photos, ticket stubs, love notes, doodling and the like can be added to a journal.

There is no right or wrong way to keep a journal. Just begin writing, allowing your thoughts to take you where they will. Let the pages be open to both positive and negative thoughts; the journal is non-judgmental. Over time, it can be a record of your growth.

There are many benefits in keeping a journal. Journal writing helps you cope

with stress and can help reduce anxiety even as it enhances creativity. Journal writing can help you process challenging or perplexing situations. Some journal writers find healing in the process of writing. Some writers find release in setting ideas or concerns on the page of a journal. Others find themselves becoming more self-confident over time.

We know that healthy hearts are created when women of faith seek balance in their own physical, mental, and spiritual health. Journaling is one way to work toward that balance.

Imagine what might happen if many women involved in our organization began journaling. I envision healthy women across the country leading balanced lives grounded in their faith, lives lived in response to their baptismal calling. I see healthy women spending more time on things that matter and less money on things that don't. I see healthy women helping to change our collective future.

Won't you pick up one of our new journals and take the plunge? No grades will be given. No one will comment on your art. Simply use the pages of your journal as a place to record your thoughts, a place where dreams and visions can take shape. Let's see where the Holy Spirit takes us. ☸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director, Women of the ELCA.

The two journals mentioned are available through Augsburg Fortress. See www.augsburgfortress.org or call 800-328-4648.

Correction

The 20th anniversary article in the June 2007 issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* listed the dates of service of two executive directors incorrectly. Cathi Braash served from October 1997 to July 2002, and Linda Post Bushkofsky has been serving since August 2002. LWT regrets the error.



AMEN!

I'm only too happy to
be blessed, God. Thanks for offering!
Here is my top tier:

Marriage: Bless my husband and me with fortitude and a little romance.

Daughters: Bless them with ingenuity and faith as they begin their adult lives.

Community: Bless us with health, and for all, equal access to abundance and care.

Earth: Bless it with resilience, given the damage we're doing to it.

And now I read your list (Matthew 5:3–12). Not quite the same. If I were a marketing student, I would wonder—who is your audience? The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, those who are reviled and persecuted and spoken of falsely “on my account.”

If I really work at it, I suppose I can see myself in a few of those categories. But who are you talking to, Jesus? Could it be me? Even though I'm a North American, white, well-educated, aging female? I'm not so sure. Though I can have a bad day now and then, on the whole, I'm pretty well blessed already.

At least, I'm blessed in the way my culture usually thinks of being blessed. I've got plenty to eat, as do most of my immediate neighbors. I've got a good job that pays enough and provides benefits that help me care for my health and my financial future. I've got a home that is stable and loving on most days. I have

healthy parents, siblings, and children. I've even got some great pets.

I did have the weeps in church this morning. I was surrounded by families with adorable children, and memories came flooding back of long-gone Sunday mornings spent trying to engage my young ones in worship. They are rarely with me in the pew now—they have left to find their own lives, as they should. But I miss them. I miss who I was with them.

And in the prayers we remembered those who had died in war this week. They were too many. And many more will come back facing a lifetime of challenge as they seek to be whole again.

And what of the young girl raped, a life wasted by chemical abuse or violence, another poison in the environment, another sectarian conflict clashing out of control? What of my own grief and shortcomings, or the simmering tension in my church? When will we find the political will to care for those whom God commanded us to hold close—all those who are today's widows and orphans and sojourners?

Then, God, I must turn to you. I pray that your grace will find its way into the cracks of our world and our stubborn hearts and teach us to see you in each other, regardless of the language we speak or the tint of our skin or the resources in our pockets. I pray that your courage will well up in us so that we might be those who bless in your name. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

In Need of Blessing

by Catherine Malotky

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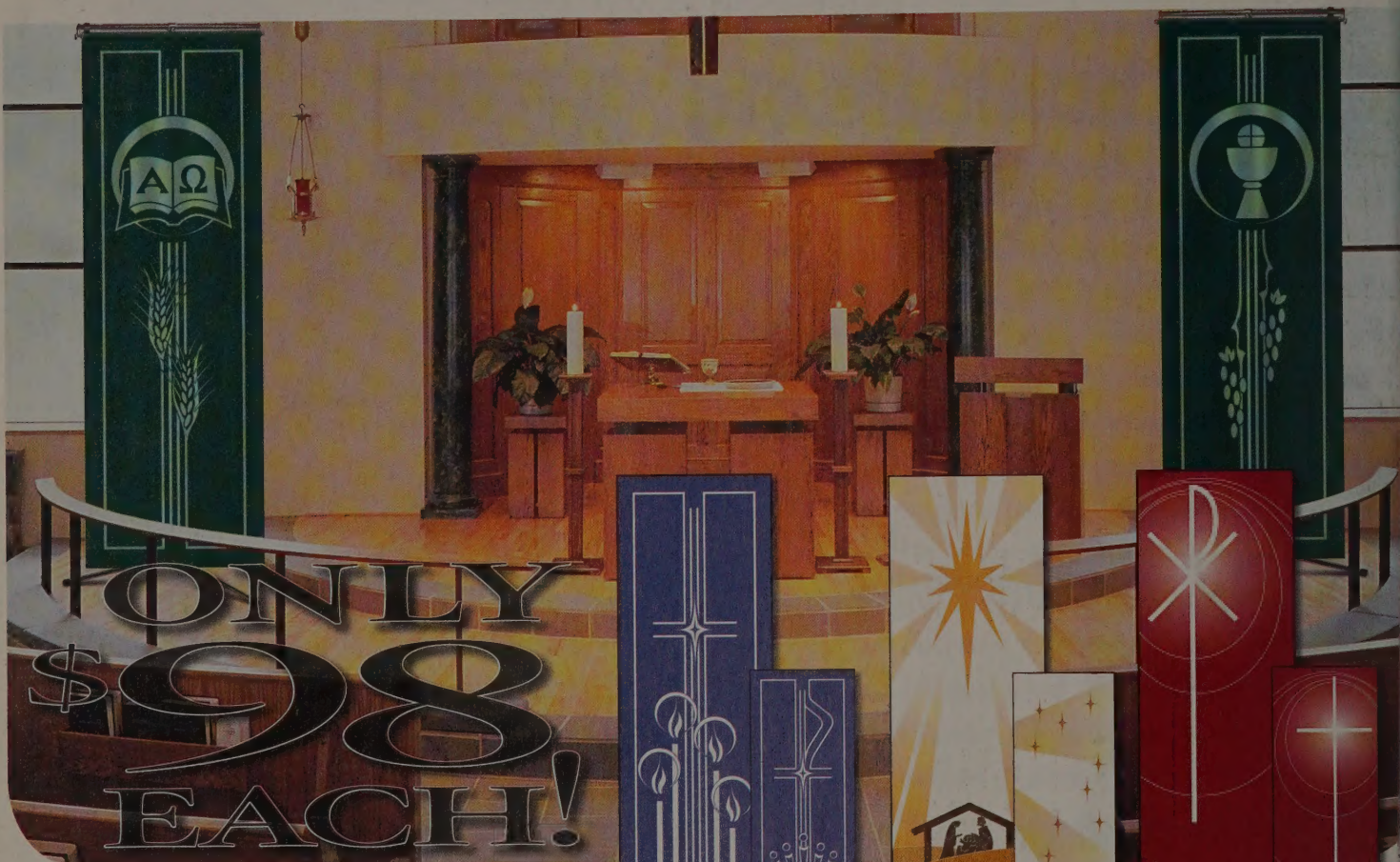
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